

Running head: SENIORITY BASED PROMOTIONAL SYSTEM

Seniority Based Promotional System of the Baton Rouge Fire Department

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Certification Statement

I hereby certify that this paper constitutes my own product, that where the language of others is set forth, quotation marks so indicate and that appropriate credit is given where I have used the language, ideas, expressions, or writings of another.

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Abstract

This applied research project analyzed the promotional system of the Baton Rouge Fire Department. The problem is the Baton Rouge Fire Department uses seniority as the basis for promotion. This system of promotion does not always ensure the best possible candidate for the position. The purpose of this research was to identify other promotional systems or the processes in a seniority based system that would identify the most qualified candidate for the position.

This project utilized the descriptive method of research to answer the following questions: What is the human resource standard(s) for a seniority based promotional system? What are the advantages and disadvantages of a seniority based promotional system? What are fire departments similar in size to the Baton Rouge Fire Department, who use the seniority, based promotional system, using to identify the most qualified candidates? What promotional models are available that other emergency response agencies are using that identifies the most qualified candidate?

A literature review was conducted as well as a survey and several interviews to gain a perspective on the seniority based promotional system. It was discovered that fewer and fewer fire departments are using a seniority based promotional system.

While seniority based promotional systems do have advantages, such as ease of administration, fairness, objectivity and a clear career path. It also has disadvantages such as diminished initiative, lack of professional development, and the minimum level of performance is the maximum expected effort. To overcome the disadvantages of a seniority based system it is recommended that prerequisites be required before a candidate is allowed to sit for the civil service exam and that criteria be set that a candidate must meet during the probational period immediately after promoting.

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Introduction

In the fire service there are many different systems of promotion. A promotion should be an award for hard work, focus and dedication. In *IFSTA Chief Officer Second Edition* Stowell (2004) noted “the mark of success in the fire service is attaining rank through promotions, in the fire service promotions should be based on merit and longevity” (p. 198).

The problem is the Baton Rouge Fire Department uses seniority as the basis for promotion. This system of promotion does not always ensure the best possible candidate for the position.

The purpose of this research is to identify other promotional systems or the processes in a seniority based promotional system that would identify the most qualified candidate for a position.

To accomplish this objective and to answer the four following research questions descriptive research methods were used.

- 1.) What is the human resource industry standard(s) for a seniority based promotional system?
- 2.) What are the advantages and disadvantages of a seniority based promotional system?
- 3.) What are fire departments similar in size to the Baton Rouge Fire Department, who use seniority based system using to identify the most qualified candidates?

- 4.) What promotional models are available that other emergency response agencies are using that identifies the most qualified candidates?

Background and Significance

The Baton Rouge Fire Department (BRFD) serves the city of Baton Rouge, Louisiana, which is in the southeast portion of the state. Baton Rouge is the state capital of Louisiana and its second largest city behind New Orleans. Baton Rouge is also the seat of local government for the Parish of East Baton Rouge. The city sits on the east bank of the Mississippi River and is home to the eighth largest deep water port by tonnage in the United States. Baton Rouge is also home to Exxon/Mobile Refinery the second largest refinery in the nation and the third largest in the world. Louisiana State University (LSU) and Southern University (SU) which is the largest predominantly black university in the nation are located in Baton Rouge and the students of these universities make up close to twenty-five percent of the population. ("Baton Rouge welcomes you," 2009, p.1)

The city measures 77 square miles and its population is around 230,000. The city has two river boat casinos, a large petrochemical corridor, is home to the highest state capital building in the nation at thirty-four stories tall as well as eleven downtown high-rise buildings. The city also has heavy commercial, industrial and all other types of residential construction spread throughout the city.

The Baton Rouge Fire Department is a career municipal department that provides fire suppression, medical first response, technical rescue, hazmat response, arson investigation, and fire prevention and education. The BRFD currently employs 600 personnel and has an annual operating budget of \$54 million. The department responded to 28,723 runs in 2009. The BRFD

operates out of 19 stations that house 19 engines, 9 ladder trucks, three service trucks, two technical rescue units and a hazardous materials unit.

Organizationally the BRFD is broken down into divisions. These divisions include suppression, training, safety, arson, hazmat, prevention/education, public information, communications, and special services.

The suppression division is run by the chief of operations, he is assisted by three deputy chiefs who are responsible for personnel, discipline and equipment and facilities. The suppression division is broken down into three shifts A, B and C shifts. Each shift is run by an assistant chief. The city is divided into districts with a district chief supervising each district. Each shift has seven district chiefs, 35 captains, 40 fire equipment operators and 60 firefighters. The other divisions in the department are run by a deputy chief and an assistant chief.

Historically the Baton Rouge Fire Department has been a leader in the fire service. The BRFD was the first fire department in the nation to obtain an Insurance Service Organization (ISO) class one rating, which was first obtained in 1979. It was also the first to repeat the rigorous reevaluation in 1986 and retained its number one rating. The BRFD was also the first department in the nation to form a mutual response organization. In 1944 the BRFD brought together industry, public services and private business that were organized to support and aid each other in times of need. This organization is called Baton Rouge Area Mutual Aid System (BRAMAS).

The current promotional system of the BRFD is based on seniority and the passing of a civil service multiple choice exam. To promote from firefighter to fire equipment operator a firefighter must have been certified in the position of firefighter for eighteen months in order to be eligible to sit for the test. After the test is graded, all candidates passing the test are ranked

according to seniority. As vacancies in the class of fire equipment operator open up the candidates are promoted off of the list in seniority order. The same procedure is followed for all positions up to and including the chief of operations. In this system it typically takes ten to twelve years to earn the first promotion, that of fire equipment operator and an additional ten to fifteen years to make captain. So the typical firefighter will work in this system for twenty years before becoming a company officer. Since 1996 the BRFD has enacted stringent hiring practices to ensure good competent recruits for its fire academies. The majority of the recruits has some college education and are technically savvy with electronics and computers, a frequent requirement in today's fire service. These new firefighters often do not understand the apathy and mediocrity of the promotional system, while older members fight hard to retain the current system.

The BRFD firefighters have a strong union, the International Association of Firefighters Local 557, and are also protected by Louisiana State Fire and Police Civil Service; this is significant because the problem is the Baton Rouge Fire Department uses a promotional system that is based on seniority. This type of system does not always ensure the best candidate for the promotion. Instead of taking the candidate with the most qualifications and experience this system takes the first candidate that meets the minimum qualifications. This system is supported by Louisiana State Law and is protected by Fire and Police Civil Service. The firefighter's union Local 557 is the recognized bargaining agent of the department's firefighters and it also heavily supports seniority as a way to protect its membership. Seniority is used almost exclusively as a means of determining station assignments, vacation picks and promotions.

The fire service is a dynamic and challenging career. In the past fire departments

provided one service, that service was fire protection; this is no longer the case. Fire departments now are required to provide an all hazard service to the citizens we serve. This service includes all types of rescue, hazmat, medical response, calls for public assistance, urban search and rescue (USAR) and fire prevention and education. An officer in the fire service must be able to communicate effectively not only to his crew but to the public we serve. A fire officer needs to be schooled in safety, supervision, management, leadership, and all phases of emergency operations. Morrill (2001) stated: "Experience alone does not provide any verification that the candidate has the required knowledge or skills for the position" (p17). Years on the job or tenure in a position are no longer a guarantee of competence. The current system of promotion allows for the minimum accepted effort to become the maximum expectation. If the BRFD is to continue to be a leader in the fire service the current system must be modified or used to its maximum potential to ensure able competent candidates are promoted.

This problem and basis of this research correlate to the United States (U.S.) Fire Administration's operational objectives one of which says "improve the fire and emergency service's professional status" (U.S. Fire Administration [USFA], 2008 p. 1).

In order to deliver a premium public service to the citizens we serve, candidates with leadership qualifications and certifications need to be promoted before a candidate simply marking time. This applied research project also relates to the National Fire Academy's Executive Development Course goals one of which is "Develop and integrate change management and leadership techniques necessary in complex organizations"(United States Department of Homeland Security, United States Fire Academy 2003, p.SM 0-3). By developing and implementing requirements of professional development prior to promotion, the fire service ensures a candidate more capable of leading in the fast paced and dynamic world of

the fire service.

Literature Review

The literature review was conducted to investigate previous research and published material relating to the research questions of this Applied Research Project (APR). The research data utilized was obtained from the National Fire Academy's Learning Resource Center, search engines from the World Wide Web, research published in books, periodicals, journals and magazines and other Executive Fire Officer Program Applied Research Papers. A survey and several interviews were conducted to evaluate fire service personnel who were either for or against seniority based promotional systems.

According to the International Association of Fire Fighters (2009) seniority based promotions have been associated with the fire service since 1903 when "promotions were originally given to the firefighter with the most political influence" (p. 40). Because of this local unions were formed to improve conditions, work schedules and fairness in promotions and hiring. Webster's New World Dictionary defines promotion as "advancement in rank, grade or position" (p. 1077). This is certainly true in the fire service where typical promotions go in order from firefighter to fire equipment operator/lieutenant, to captain/ company officer to chief officer. According to the State of Louisiana Civil Service Law (2009), "seniority is the length of service by a firefighter in a continuing job or position" (p. 2473). A careful analysis of obtainable data has revealed that when a fire department looks at promotions from the standpoint of seniority the department accepts that the employee with the longest amount of time on the job or in the preceding position has the greater experience and job knowledge to perform at the next higher level. Many fire departments use a system where seniority plays a factor in who gets promoted. Fewer and fewer departments are using a seniority only based promotional system.

According to Louisiana Fire and Police Civil Service Law (2009) “when a vacancy cannot be filled by reinstatement or by reemployment the position will be filled from the promotional list” (p. 33.2941). The Municipal Fire and Police Civil Service Board of the appointing city or authority having jurisdiction will have produced the promotional list made up of eligible candidates ranked in order of seniority. In order to be eligible for promotion the candidate must have passed the civil service written test for the respective position with a minimum score of seventy-five. All Civil Service Tests are multiple choice and will generally contain one hundred to one hundred fifty questions that are job related. The appointing authority then ranks the candidates in order of seniority. In this typical system, to quote an often heard firefighter refrain “a score of seventy-five is as good as a hundred”. The senior employee on the promotional list with a passing score will receive the promotion. This is done until the promotional list is cleared or the list expires. The promotional list expires after eighteen months.

In a study done by the University of California (2009) the employment history of farm workers were studied as well as agricultural businesses that used seniority only based promotional systems. The study determined that there are several advantages to using seniority based promotional system. These advantages include the employee gaining valuable experience and knowledge as they work and are promoted. This is provided the employee stays employed and vacancies occur for the employee to promote. The study also found that often the previous job was a good learning platform to bridge the gap to the next job in the promotional ladder. Because competition between employees was not a factor, cooperation between workers was not hindered. In his study of the Green Bay Fire Department, Erdman (2000) noted that many people in his department said the seniority system in Green Bay promoted “good will and camaraderie in the ranks”(p10). It was also believed that there is less backstabbing for personal

gain (p. 10). A Berkley of California study noted that “seniority based promotional system also tends to promote loyalty and reward cooperation” (p. 17). In the IAFF publication the *Professional Firefighter* (2009) it contends that seniority is “well defined and is the most objective way to promote as it eliminates problems associated with subjective evaluations” (p40). The thought process on seniority is that the qualifications needed to perform at the next higher level are gained from work experience, the longer the tenure of the worker the greater the experience. Many labor unions are in favor of seniority based systems as a means of protecting their members. The Brotherhood of Maintenance Way Worker’s Union (2009) believes that seniority is a way for “determining employment advantages based upon length of service” (p. 1). Phelan and Lin (2008) said “seniority based systems offer clear career paths and succession planning, low turnover, and objectivity in promoting” (p5). One very clear advantage to seniority based promotions is the increased maturity level of employees at the time of promotions. Wolverton (2008) noted that “often times emergency vehicle accidents are caused by young, immature, aggressive drivers” (p.10). In some departments where the first promotion is fire equipment operator it may take an eighteen year old firefighter ten years to promote to this position and twenty years to promote to company officer. The seniority system gives the firefighter the time and the maturity to promote. Another often quoted advantage of a seniority based promotional system is that favoritism or political influence is not a factor in the promotional system.

If advantages exist so do disadvantages, fewer and fewer organizations are using a strictly seniority based promotional system. In *Effective Supervisory Practices* (2005) the famed American psychologist Fredrick Herzberg performed an extensive study of employees on the job and developed his theory that said there are characteristics that define satisfied and unsatisfied

employees. Herzberg called these factors “hygiene and motivator factors” (p.66) The motivator factors that stimulated satisfied employees according to Herzberg are” achievement, recognition, work itself, responsibility and advancement”(p. 66). Herzberg said” job satisfaction and motivation to work are related to participation and performance” (p. 66). A seniority system rewards time, not necessarily performance this could work against the motivating factors for the satisfied employees. According to a recent article in *Fortune* Munk (1999) said “seniority no longer matters in most companies” (p. 14). The article suggested that in today’s economy companies have very little tolerance for employees whose income is greater than their output and this is typically the most senior employees making the higher salaries. The change can even be seen in Japan where employment practices in this country have traditionally been centered on seniority and seniority based promotions. *Focus Japan* (2000) noted “Japanese companies like most American companies have gone to a system of determining promotions and salary not on seniority but on merit” (p. 1). In 2005 in the State of California a unanimous decision handed down from the California State Supreme Court rejected a series of seniority based contracts because the civil service laws of California are based on merit, the court said “the use of seniority as the sole deciding factor precludes the state from appointing the best-qualified people” (p. 13). Like most businesses a majority of the fire service has also gotten away from seniority based promotions. One of the biggest disadvantages to seniority based promotions is the system breeds mediocrity. Mediocrity according to *Webster’s New World Dictionary* is defined as “neither very good nor very bad, ordinary, average not good enough: inferior” (p843). In his book *How to Become a Great Boss* Fox (2002) noted:

Mediocrity is an insidious disease that saps the vitality, innovation and energy of any organization. If the mediocre get a real or perceived award than good people’s

performance will drift down to the mediocre level. This type of system discourages poor performers from leaving (p.19).

The system is based on time as an employee, the average or poor performer promotes as fast as the outstanding performer. The system kills motivation and initiative. The qualifications of the member being promoted in a seniority based system are often in question, Gibson (1982) stated:

While this method of promotion may select a person with a great deal of experience, it may also promote an individual who has just been marking time.

Much can be said for experience, but a seniority system tends to discourage the young and often establishes a nonproductive attitude. Seniority alone does not adequately forecast a person's capabilities nor does it determine those best qualified for promotion (p.29).

Regardless of the type of promotional system used, the goal of any good promotional system should be to discover and promote the best and most qualified person based on the job description. In *IFSTA Chief Officer Second Edition* Stowell (2004) noted the "mark of success in the fire service is attaining rank through promotions, in the fire service promotions should be based on merit and longevity" (p. 198).

Because of the laws in the State of Louisiana all fire and police civil service promotions are seniority based. A careful analysis of obtainable data and through personal interviews it was discovered that the majority of large municipal fire departments in the State of Louisiana have used this system to their advantage. The Fire and Police Civil Service of Louisiana reserves the right to be the final testing agency. Because of this no fire department can conduct any additional written test that will affect the promotion of an individual who has passed the civil service test. A fire department cannot require a candidate who has scored a passing grade of

seventy-five percent or better on a civil service promotion test to take any other type of job related written test to validate the candidates ability to do the job. To overcome this limitation some municipal fire departments in Louisiana have started to require candidates to obtain prerequisites to become eligible for a promotion. These requirements include certifications and educational qualifications based on the position the candidate is applying for. The advantage to these types of requirements is a senior employee who is motivated and career conscious has a greater chance of being promoted over a senior employee who is strictly marking time and has not taken the personal initiative to prepare for promotion. The Fire and Police Civil Service System of Louisiana also has a provision that a candidate who is promoted into a position that the candidate is “unwilling or is unable to perform at an acceptable level then that candidate may be demoted and or replaced” (p.2488). The fire chief of the appointing department has six months to a year to either certify the candidate or demote the candidate. This time period is known as the probationary period and the candidate can be demoted at any point in that period. Of course the candidate can file an appeal through civil service.

In fire departments around the country assessment centers have become very popular in determining and identifying qualified candidates for promotions. An assessment center is a series of tests both written and practical as well as interviews and simulations that test candidates overall potential for promotion. Because written tests alone are typically considered one dimensional the assessment center concept, test the candidate in all phases of the job. Edwards (2005) noted: “Because the assessment center is based on a careful job analysis this form of promotion is considered very accurate in determining a candidate’s suitability” (p. 111). According to the *Fire Chief’s Handbook* Barr and Eversole (2003) noted: “the rationale for assessment centers is that this type of exam is more thorough and demonstrates the candidates’

ability to think on their feet” (p. 240). Some of the favorable attributes an assessment center measures are motivation, practical intelligence, emotional stability, social skills, leadership potential, observation and the ability to communicate on a professional level.

The fire service has always considered itself to be a paramilitary organization. Many public safety agencies have used the military model to promote its members. In the military service two avenues of advancement and or promotion are available; these avenues are advancement as an enlisted member or promotion as an officer. According to the *United States Coast Guard Personnel Manual* (2009) “The objective of this system is to ensure the required degree of proficiency at the various levels within each specialty and promote those best qualified to fill vacancies which occur” (p. 5). This type of system takes several things into consideration when determining placement for promotions. This includes time in service, time in grade, awards and commendations, written test scores, qualifications, written evaluations, work history and recommendation to advance from the candidate’s supervisors. A point system is applied and a total advancement score is used to place the candidate on the advancement list in a ranked order. In the military an officer is required to have an educational degree to enter the service as an officer. The military academies require all its potential officers to graduate with a four year degree. Many emergency response agencies now use this model as means to promote. Many for profit emergency response agencies such as ambulance services and hospital based ambulance services require its supervisors to hold advanced educational degrees to move up in the company.

This literature review was conducted to objectively evaluate the relevance of a seniority based promotional system. From this review it is determined that the fire departments who currently use a seniority based system and whose members are in a union heavily favor and fiercely protect promotions by seniority. While seniority based systems do have some

advantages it is obvious that the disadvantages far out weigh the advantages. Looking at for-profit private business where initiative and productivity are valued, seniority based systems are very hard to find. In order to foster initiative and competition an employee must be able to see a reward for their work. Promotions should be viewed as a reward not a right. In *Fire and emergency services instructor* (2005) highlight Maslow's hierarchy of needs, Abraham Maslow suggested that "our needs are organized on a hierarchical ladder, one of these needs are self-actualization, or self-fulfillment: full development of ones abilities and a satisfying personal life" (p. 114). A promotion based on effort and hard work should be part of self-actualization. The majority of fire departments no longer promote on seniority alone. Those departments that do promote with seniority as a basis have prerequisites in place that a candidate must meet before using seniority to promote. While a person can very well earn experience through tenure it is also very easy to mark time and meet the required minimum to move through a system based on seniority.

Procedures

Definition of Terms

Seniority. Means the total employment computed for an employee beginning with the last date on which he was regularly and permanently appointed and has worked continuously to and including the date of computation. Time during which an employee has served in the armed forces of the United States subsequent to May 1, 1940, not to exceed four years, shall be construed to mean continuous service and shall be included in the computation of seniority. Total seniority in the departmental service, including positions of any and all classes, or seniority in any one or more given classes, may be computed for an employee, but in either case employment shall be continuous and unbroken by a resignation or discharge of the

respective employee. An employee who is finally discharged or resigns from his position shall forfeit all accumulated seniority. An employee who is suspended and returns to his position immediately following the expiration of his suspension shall not forfeit his seniority accumulated to the date of his suspension, but he shall not be given credit for the lost time at any future computation.

Assessment Centers. A promotional tool composed of a series of evaluative exercises and test used for selection and development of candidates.

Position. Term meaning any office and employment in the municipal fire and police services, the duties of which call for services to be rendered by one person.

Promotion. Term meaning a change of an employee in the classified service from a position of one class to a position of a higher class which generally affords increased responsibilities and pay.

Research Methodology

The outcome of this research project was to identify a promotional system that would promote the best possible candidate for a position or how the current system of seniority based promotion could be used or modified to identify the best possible candidate. Descriptive research was used in this applied research project to find information on the current system of promotion as well as what other fire departments, private business and other agencies were using to promote qualified candidates. A survey was taken to gather information on how the current promotional system affected the current members of the Baton Rouge Fire Department. A copy of the survey appears in Appendix A. Several interviews were conducted with high ranking fire department officials that included the Fire Chief of the Baton Rouge Fire Department, Ed Smith, the President of the Louisiana State Firefighters Association, Chad Majors, the Administrative

Assistant to the Fire Chief, Barry Mounce and the local Union 557 President Curt Monte to gain an understanding of how the current system of promotions affected their jobs at the administrative level.

A literature review was also conducted to gather information on what the standard seniority based system looked like. What were the advantages and disadvantages of the current system and what are the alternatives to seniority based system.

Assumptions and Limitations

The first limitation was the survey. Due to a system restriction on the number of surveys returned only 100 surveys were used for this research. This survey represents a very good cross section of the BRFD as it received returns from all age groups, positions and levels of education as well as returns from all three shifts. The chart results are listed in Appendix B.

Results

Answers to Research Questions

Research Question One. What is the human resource standard for a seniority based promotional system?

Through the literature review it was discovered that the majority of seniority based systems are protected by civil service. In the case of the Baton Rouge Fire Department and other large municipalities in the State of Louisiana that serve a population between 13,000 and 400,000, the Louisiana Fire and Police Civil Service Laws are standard. This is the example that was followed for the standard seniority based system. In this system an employee must be certified in their current position for eighteen months before they are eligible to sit for the promotional test for the next level. If the eligibility requirements are met the candidate must take a multiple choice, job specific test. The candidate must pass the test with a score of seventy-five

percent or better to be eligible for promotion. All eligible candidates that pass the test are then ranked according to their seniority. When vacancies at the next level become available that is not to be filled by rehires, reinstatements or demotions, the first candidate on the hiring list is promoted. In some systems no test is given, only an eligibility factor of time in service is weighed to determine the promotional list. In the standard seniority based system the first candidate that meets the minimum requirements with the most tenure is promoted.

Research Question Two.

What are the advantages and disadvantages of a seniority based system?

The advantages of a seniority based system are that the system is fair and considered very objective. It allows a person to gain very valuable experience and maturity before moving to the next level. The system is noncompetitive which reduces backstabbing and increases cooperation throughout the workplace. The position the candidate currently holds is a good learning platform for the next level promotion and political influence is not a factor in who gets promoted. Seniority based systems tend to promote loyalty and reward cooperation. Seniority systems protect workers and offer clear career paths. From an administrative standpoint the system is simple and very cost effective to apply. It also reduces turnover.

The disadvantages of the seniority system are that the system does not allow the best qualified person to promote. The system breeds mediocrity and decreases motivation and initiative. The system discourages poor performers from leaving and promotes poor or average performers as fast as excellent candidates. A seniority based system does not guarantee that seniority produces experience. A seniority system tends to produce a nonproductive attitude and does not adequately forecast a candidate's ability to do the job. This type of system does not reward education or certifications.

Research Question Three.

What are fire departments similar in size to the Baton Rouge Fire Department, who use seniority, based promotional system, using to identify the most qualified candidate?

In order to identify the most qualified or a more qualified candidate some large municipal departments have developed prerequisites based on the position the candidate is applying for. The candidates then must meet the criteria before they are eligible to promote. These requirements will usually include certifications and education. Some departments have developed criteria that a candidate must meet after promotion, if the candidate is unwilling or unable to meet the criteria in a probational period, usually lasting six months to a year the candidate is demoted to their last position. In a seniority based system protected by civil service, the first person who meets the minimum criteria is promoted.

Research Question Four.

What promotional models are available that other emergency response agencies are using that identifies the most qualified candidate?

In recent years many fire departments have taken to using assessment centers to determine who gets promoted. An assessment center uses a system that test multiple phases of the candidate's ability at the next higher level. In order to be considered for the promotion the candidate must first qualify and then pass the assessment center. This system takes into account time in service, education, certifications and abilities. It also measures motivation, practical intelligence, emotional stability, social skills, leadership potential, observation and the ability to communicate on a professional level.

Some systems such as the civil service system of the State of California use a merit based system. The merit based system is based on motivation, productivity, and active participation in

the workplace as well as recommendations from the immediate supervisor.

Some public safety agencies and the United States Military namely the United States Coast Guard use a point system of promotion. This point system is based on time in rank, time in service, awards and commendations, written test scores and recommendations from the candidate's supervisors. The candidate for promotion must also have favorable marks. Marks are written evaluations that define the productivity, education and efforts of the candidate. The promotional list is then prepared and ranked according to a point's matrix. Education is also stressed in these types of systems where often formal advanced degrees are required for promotion to supervisory or management positions. This is very prevalent in private business. In the military academies a four year degree is required before a cadet is commissioned as an officer. A degree from an institution of higher learning demonstrates an ability to write and communicate effectively, the ability to persevere and see goals to the end, plus typically leadership and management theories are mandatory for graduation.

Survey Rationale

The survey questionnaire used for this applied research project consisted of ten questions. The questions were developed to gain an understanding of the effect of a seniority based system on the fire department members. The questionnaire was sent out to all fire department members. 100 responses were used as a cross reference of the entire department representing all the demographics. A copy of this survey and the accompanying charts are located in Appendix A.

The first survey question in the questionnaire asked; what is your current position in the Baton Rouge Fire Department? out of the 100 responses 25% were firefighters, 19% were fire equipment operators, 25% were company officers, 15% were chief officers and 16% were classified as "other" included in the "other" category were fire records clerks, communications

officers, and mechanics.

Survey question number two asked; how long have you been employed at the Baton Rouge Fire Department? 15% have been employed 1-5 years, 21% have been employed 6-10 years, 30% have been employed 11-20 years, 15% have been employed 21-25 years and 19% have been employed 26 years or more.

Survey question number three asked; what is your current education level? 1% had a general education diploma (GED), 35% had a high school diploma, 42% had some college, 10% had a two year degree, 17% had a four year degree and 1% had a master's degree.

Survey question number four asked; do you hold a national certification for your current position? For example, firefighter II for firefighter and fire officer I for company officer. 57.6% of the respondents answered yes they did hold a national certification for their current position. 38.4% of the respondents answered no they did not hold a national certification for their current position. 4% of the respondents answered not applicable.

Survey question five asked; in regard to the seniority based promotional system of the Baton Rouge Fire Department, what is your opinion of the fairness of the system? 37.4% of the respondents thought the system was very fair. 52.5% of the respondents thought the system was fair, 10.1% of the respondents thought the system was unfair. None of the respondents thought the system was very unfair.

Survey question number six asked; in regard to the seniority based promotional system of the Baton Rouge Fire Department, in your opinion does the seniority in the fire service equal experience or expertise? 26% of the respondents answered yes, 63.5% of the respondents answered no, 10.4% of the respondents answered unsure, 4% of the respondents skipped this question.

Survey question number seven asked; in regard to the seniority based promotional system of the Baton Rouge Fire Department, what is your satisfaction with the current promotional system? 26% of the respondents said they were very satisfied, 54% of the respondents said they were satisfied, 17% of the respondents said they were unsatisfied and 3% of the respondents were very unsatisfied.

Survey question number eight asked; in your opinion does the current promotional system of the Baton Rouge Fire Department ensure a qualified candidate is promoted? 10% of the respondents said always, 76% of the respondents said sometimes, 14 % of the respondents said rarely, 2% of the respondents said never.

Survey question number nine asked; in your opinion does the Baton Rouge Fire Department prepare its employees for promotions? 40% of the respondents answered yes, 49% of the respondents said no, 11% of the respondents answered unsure.

Survey question number ten asked; in your opinion do you see the current promotional system as an advantage or disadvantage to the public we serve? 45% of the respondents said it was an advantage, 28% of the respondents said it was a disadvantage, 27% of the respondents said they were unsure.

The results of this survey are mixed, while 54% of the respondents expressed satisfaction with the current system, 76% of the respondents believed a qualified candidate was only sometimes promoted. Another quandary was 49% of the respondents said the department did not prepare the employees for promotion but 45% of the respondents felt this was an advantage for the public; this seems to be in conflict. In the Baton Rouge Fire Department the seniority based promotional system is highly defended and any mention of change is met with much resistance. This is in conflict with the fact that 42% of the respondents have some college and 27% hold

either a two or four year degree and 57.6% hold a national certification for their current position. In the BRFD's current promotional system there are no benefits outside of personal pride or satisfaction to obtaining certifications or education.

Interviews

The first interview was conducted with Chief Chad Major, Chief Major is head of the Statistical and Analysis Division of the BRFD. Chief Major is also former president of the Firefighter's Union Local 557 and current Louisiana State President of the International Firefighter's Association. Chief Majors discussed how the current civil service system resulted out of the corruption and political favoritism of the "Spoils System" where political parties would often pay back supporters by giving them jobs. Civil service reform took place around 1871.

In Louisiana in 1940 Governor Sam Jones instituted the civil service system that did away with political patronage system. The civil service system in Louisiana has been a seniority driven system ever since. The advantage of the system that Chief Majors noted was the fairness of the system. The majority of fire departments in Louisiana didn't start hiring minorities and women until the early 1970s. Seniority allowed women and minorities to advance because the system is objective. As this research was being conducted the Baton Rouge Fire Department was on the verge of promoting its first female district chief in its history. Chief Major also noted the shortcomings of the system but felt the stipulation in the system that allowed a non-performer to be demoted during the probational period was how competence and experience could be maintained. Chief Majors said the "seniority based system was simplistic and very cost effective to administer and maintain" (C. Major personal communication January 27, 2010).

The second interview conducted was Chief Barry Mounce. Chief Mounce is the

Administrative Assistant to the Fire Chief of the Baton Rouge Fire Department and the former Public Information Officer. Chief Mounce felt the seniority promotional system “put a huge damper on initiative and motivation” (B. Mounce personal communication January 27, 2010). It was also discussed that the seniority system has developed a culture in the fire department that encouraged an entitlement attitude about promotions. Chief Mounce said “a promotion should be a reward for hard work and effort and not a right for hanging around the longest” (B. Mounce personal communication January 27, 2010). Chief Mounce also repeated an often heard saying that goes “if seniority is such a great system why aren’t unions run by seniority” (B. Mounce personal communication January 27, 2010).

Chief Curt Monte, the Assistant Public Information Officer for the Baton Rouge Fire Department and the current President of the International Association of Firefighters Local 557 was interviewed for this research and Chief Monte believed that the current seniority based promotional system “allowed for greater diversity because the system is color blind” (C. Monte personal communication February 1, 2010). Chief Monte believes there are no perfect systems out there that each has advantages and disadvantages. Chief Monte said that a seniority based system “delineates a clear career path” (C. Monte personal communication February 1, 2010). Local 557 has been in existence since May 5, 1938 and has been supporting the seniority system since its inception.

To gain perspective from the administrative side, the Fire Chief of the Baton Rouge Fire Department Ed Smith was interviewed. Chief Smith said a clear advantage for an administrator is the “political and peer pressure influence from colleagues, department heads and other administrators to promote one person over another is absent with a seniority based system” (E. Smith personal communication February 1, 2010).

A clear disadvantage from the administrative standpoint is the fact that this type of promotional system kills personal initiative. It allows a trend toward the minimum accepted achievement. This affects the balance of the department, where you have several well trained individuals with high personal standards and drive and others who are content strictly to get by until time for promotion. This becomes difficult at this time because as an administrator I now have to devise ways to provide motivation. (E. Smith personal communication February 1, 2010).

Discussion

The literature review, questionnaires and the interviews show that the seniority based promotional system currently in use in the Baton Rouge Fire Department (BRFD) is well entrenched and protected by state law. Currently there are no prerequisites for promotion in the BRFD other than tenure and the passing of the civil service test with a minimum passing grade of 75%. This has an effect on the fire department leadership and management because the best person for the job is not always promoted. In a profession that sees on average 100 line of duty deaths per year we owe it to our firefighters to ensure their leadership is competent. It has been argued that seniority is the best promotional system for the fire service. The research shows that there are other systems that can be utilized or that the current seniority system can be manipulated to ensure competent leadership

What is the human resource standard for a seniority based system? The seniority based system supported by Louisiana Fire and Police Civil Service Law is very typical of any seniority system researched. An employee who is eligible for promotion by virtue of a designated amount of time on the job must typically take a test to ensure job based knowledge. If the employee passes the test with a minimum passing grade, generally 75%, they are placed on a promotional

list in seniority ranked order.

A seniority based system is most often supported by a union backed workforce. Many unions are in favor of a seniority based system as a way to protect its members from outside political influence or favoritism. The Brotherhood of Maintenance Way Worker's Unions (2009) believe that seniority is a way for "determining employment advantages based upon length of service" (p. 1). The general consensus and the most mentioned advantage of the seniority based system is the fairness of the system. The majority of the Baton Rouge Fire Department personnel surveyed were found to favor seniority based system. The vast majority of firefighters in the BRFD are members of the Firefighter's Union Local 557. The unions in Louisiana are heavy supporters of the current promotional system. Survey question five asked; in regards to the seniority based promotional system of the Baton Rouge Fire Department, what is your opinion of the fairness of the system? 37.4% of the respondents thought the system was very fair. 52.5% of the respondents thought the system was fair, 10.1% of the respondents thought the system was unfair. None of the respondents thought the system was very unfair.

Some other noted advantages to the system are the system allows for a clear promotional path and the system is very objective. L. Erdman (2000) noted that the seniority system promoted "goodwill and camaraderie in the ranks" (p. 10). During interviews conducted with top fire department administrators an often heard advantage was the ease and cost effectiveness of administering the system. Phelan and Lin (2008) said seniority based systems offer "clear career paths and succession planning, low turnover, and objectivity in promoting" (p5). One very clear advantage to seniority based promotions is the increased maturity level of employees at the time of promotions. Wolverton (2008) noted that often times emergency vehicle accidents are caused by "young, immature, aggressive drivers" (p.10). The thought process on the seniority

system is the longer a person has been on the job the more experience they should accumulate. This appeared to be contraindicated in the questionnaire. Survey question number six asked; in regards to the seniority based promotional system of the Baton Rouge Fire Department, in your opinion does the seniority in the fire service equal experience or expertise? 26% of the respondents answered yes, 63.5% of the respondents answered no, 10.4% of the respondents answered unsure, 4% of the respondents skipped this question. Out of 100 personnel surveyed 89.9% believed the system to be at least fair and 63.5% believed that tenure does not necessary equal experience. This supports the theory that the qualifications of the member being promoted in a seniority based system are often in question, Gibson (1982) stated:

While this method of promotion may select a person with a great deal of experience, it may also promote an individual who has just been marking time.

Much can be said for experience, but a seniority system tends to discourage the young and often establishes a nonproductive attitude. Seniority alone does not adequately forecast a person's capabilities nor does it determine those best qualified for promotion (p.29).

This contradiction leads to the disadvantages of the seniority based system. The research has revealed that many companies, private and public no longer use a strictly seniority driven system. Two of the most often mentioned disadvantages to the system are the mediocrity that is fostered by the system and the lack of initiative that the system breeds.

In his book *How to Become a Great Boss* Fox (2002) noted:

Mediocrity is an insidious disease that saps the vitality, innovation and energy of any organization. If the mediocre get a real or perceived award than good people's performance will drift down to the mediocre level. This type of system discourages poor

performers from leaving (p.19).

In an interview conducted with Chief Barry Mounce (2010). It was discussed that the seniority system has developed a culture in the fire department that encouraged an entitlement attitude about promotions. Chief Mounce said “a promotion should be a reward for hard work and effort and not a right for hanging around the longest” (B. Mounce personal communication January 27, 2010).

In *IFSTA Chief Officer Second Edition* Stowell (2004) noted the “mark of success in the fire service is attaining rank through promotions, in the fire service promotions should be based on merit and longevity” (p. 198) This brings up research question number three, What are fire departments similar in size to the Baton Rouge Fire Department, who use seniority, based promotional system, using to identify the most qualified candidate? Because the BRFD promotional system is protected by law the system is very hard to change. Many departments in Louisiana have started to develop prerequisites for advancement or promotion. This type of prerequisite does not violate the fire and police civil service law. It does however require a base of knowledge and it ensures some initiative and professional development on the part of the candidate. Another part of the system that is often under used is a stipulation for demoting poor candidates. The Fire and Police Civil Service System of Louisiana has a provision that a candidate who is promoted into a position that the candidate is “unwilling or is unable to perform at an acceptable level then that candidate may be demoted and or replaced” (p.2488). The fire chief of the appointing department has six months to a year to either certify the candidate or demote them. This time period is known as the probationary period and the candidate can be demoted at any point in that period. In an interview with Chief Chad Majors, Chief Majors noted that the stipulation in the system that allowed a non-performer to be demoted during the

probational period was how “competence and experience could be maintained”. Chief Majors said the “seniority based system was simplistic and very cost effective to administer and maintain” (C. Major personal communication January 27, 2010).

What promotional models are available that other emergency response agencies are using that identifies the most qualified candidate? The research indicated that a very popular method of promoting a well rounded and qualified candidate was an assessment center. Assessment centers are popular because it takes into consideration all phases of a candidate’s abilities and not just a written test. A recently retired Chief Greg Messina had this to say about a written promotional test. “Passing a written test doesn’t make you qualified, just like failing a written test makes doesn’t make you unqualified” (G. Messina personal communication January 8, 2010). Written test are consider one dimensional, while assessment centers measure much more. Edwards (2005) said: “Because the assessment center is based on a careful job analysis this form of promotion is considered very accurate in determining a candidate’s suitability” (p. 111).

In order for a candidate to pass an assessment center much preparation, initiative and professional development must be accomplished by the candidate. According to the *Fire Chief’s Handbook* Barr and Eversole (2003) noted: “the rationale for assessment centers is that this type of exam is more thorough and demonstrates the candidates’ ability to think on their feet” (p. 240). Some of the favorable attributes an assessment center measures are motivation, practical intelligence, emotional stability, social skills, leadership potential, observation and the ability to communicate on a professional level. An assessment center could build a great deal of credibility into promotions. In this type of system, promotion could be seen as an award for hard work, focus, initiative and drive. These attributes are what should drive a promotional system

where firefighters must be able to trust their leadership.

Other systems of promotion that was researched was the military and for profit and hospital based emergency services. Because these types of services are ran for profit their systems were quite different from the BRFD seniority based system. The bottom line in these services is making money. These services were run like a business, where an employee seeking to move up into management must have a college degree and prove their self to be somewhat competent.

The military had an excellent system of promotion where the end result was promoting the best qualified. According to the *United States Coast Guard Personnel Manual* (2009) “The objective of this system is to ensure the required degree of proficiency at the various levels within each specialty and promote those best qualified to fill vacancies which occur” (p. 5). This type of system takes several things into consideration when determining placement for promotions. This includes time in service, time in grade, awards and commendations, written test scores, qualifications, written evaluations, work history and recommendation to advance from the candidate’s supervisors. A point system is applied and a total advancement score is used to place the candidate on the advancement list in a ranked order. This is an excellent system that takes into account seniority as well as work ethics and potential.

The BRFD has to seriously reconsider how and who it promotes. This research has led me to discover that fewer and fewer departments are using seniority for a basis of promotion. Although the system has advantages, the disadvantages of allowing mediocrity to become the basis of a fire department culture based on its promotional system is not conducive to the citizens we claim to protect.

Recommendations

This research has determined that the current system of promotion for the Baton Rouge Fire Department (BRFD) is well entrenched; it is supported by state law, civil service and has strong support from the firefighters union. While this system has several advantages such as fairness, ease of administration and its objectivity, its disadvantages far outweigh the seniority system's advantages. These disadvantages include its lack of professional development; the system also breeds mediocrity and a lack of initiative. In this system of promotion, advancement is seen as an entitlement instead of a reward for hard work, determination and capabilities. Promotions should push the department to greater heights of professionalism and education and it should be a measuring stick used to determine the progression of the department's capabilities.

Changing the current system of promotion in the BRFD would take major changes by the Louisiana Legislature. This would encompass changing laws and deeply entrenched attitudes about the fire service and the civil service system in general. This is most likely not to happen without a major grassroots effort from the fire chiefs of Louisiana and a backing from the firefighters' unions. This means recommendations are going to have to include working within the current system.

The current system of promotion is very cut and dry and the process is spelled out very clearly. The candidates are promoted by seniority once they have passed the civil service exam. Once they have been promoted no promoting authority can administer a written test that will affect the promotion of the candidate. The Fire and Police Civil Service of Louisiana reserve the right to be the sole testing agency for promotions.

My recommendations are that prerequisites of professionalism, certification and education be set for each level of promotion within the BRFD promotional ladder. This means

that for the first promotion a firefighter makes, which is fire equipment operator; that firefighter to be eligible to sit for the civil service test, must have an International Fire Service Accreditation Congress (IFSAC) certificate for fire equipment operator. The candidate must also be current in their Emergency Medical Technician certifications. I also recommend that after promotion, during the candidate's probationary period that set criteria are met by the candidate that includes practical exercises as well as interviews by a committee made up of all levels of supervision and union officials. These practical exercises would include over the road driving, backing, parking and evasive maneuver driving. It would also include maintenance, and documentation practical exercises. The interview would be based on an assessment center study that would focus on the candidate's ability to think on their feet and deal with questions and situations that a first line supervisor would have to face. If the candidate is unsuccessful or unwilling to participate in the practical exercises or the interview within the probationary period, the candidate will be demoted to the candidate's original position and the candidate will forfeit the right to promote for the duration of the current promotional list.

The next step on the promotional ladder is captain; this is the company officer level supervisor and the backbone of the fire service. It is my recommendation that the prerequisites for this promotion are IFSAC certificate for Fire Officer I and a college level communications and leadership class taught by the BRFD training division before the candidate is allowed to sit for the civil service exam. This class would focus on written and spoken communications, basic leadership and management concepts and BRFD specific standard operating procedures and guidelines. After the candidate is promoted into the position, I recommend that a set criteria be met before the expiration of the probationary period. These criteria would be based on the job of company officer and would include practical exercises and an interview before a committee

made up of all levels of supervision and union representatives. The practical exercises would include size-up and fire ground command exercises using simulations and company management and supervision problems based on case studies. The interview would consist of communications and customer service problems the candidate would have to solve. If the candidate is unsuccessful or unwilling to participate in the practical exercises or interview before the end of the probationary period the candidate would be demoted to the candidate's original position and will forfeit the right to promote for the duration of the current promotional list.

The next step on the promotional ladder is district chief; it is my recommendation that the prerequisites for this position are IFSAC certificate for Fire Officer II, Fire Instructor I and all levels of the National Incident Management System (NIMS) to include 100, 200, 300, 400, 700, 800 before the candidate is allowed to sit for the civil service test. After the candidate is promoted into the position, I recommend that a set criteria be met before the expiration of the probationary period. This criteria would be based on the job of chief officer and include practical exercises and an interview conducted by a committee made up of all levels of supervision and union representatives. The practical exercise would include fire ground command and fire ground command emergencies such as firefighter down or missing personnel using simulations. The interview would include customer service interaction and personnel issues the candidate will have to solve during the interview. If the candidate is unsuccessful or unwilling to participate in the practical exercises or interview before the end of the probationary period the candidate would be demoted to the candidate's original position and will forfeit the right to promote for the duration of the current promotional list.

It is my recommendation that any promotion after this level require a college degree or at minimum a professional certificate documenting a minimum of thirty college credit hours and all

appropriate IFSAC certificates for a chief officer at this level, as a prerequisite before the candidate is allowed to sit for the civil service test. After the candidate is promoted into the position, I recommend that a set criteria be met before the expiration of the probationary period. This criteria would be based on the job of chief officer and include practical exercises and an interview conducted by a committee made up of all levels of supervision and union representatives. If the candidate is unsuccessful or unwilling to participate in the practical exercises or interview before the end of the probationary period the candidate would be demoted to the candidate's original position and will forfeit the right to promote for the duration of the current promotional list.

These recommendations are designed to improve professional development, encourage education, training and self motivation. It does not violate the civil service laws because all of the tests are practical in nature and require the candidate to demonstrate the desired competencies for the level of promotion the candidate is applying for; it rewards hard work and effort and keeps the promotion from becoming an entitlement for someone strictly marking time.

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Appendix A

Fire Department Questionnaire

1. What is your current position in the Baton Rouge Fire Department?

Firefighter
Fire Equipment operator
Company Officer
Chief Officer
Other

2. How long have you been employed at the Baton Rouge Fire Department?

1-5 years
6-10 year
11-20 years
21-25 years
26 years or more

3. What is your current education level?

GED
High School
Some College
2 Year degree
4 year Degree
Masters

4. Do you currently hold a National Certification for your current position? For example
Firefighter II for firefighter, Fire Officer I for Captain.

Yes
No
Not Applicable

5. In regards to the seniority based promotional system of the Baton Rouge Fire
Department, what is your opinion of the fairness of the system?

Very fair
Fair
Unfair
Very Unfair

6. In regards to the seniority based promotional system of the Baton Rouge Fire Department, in your opinion does seniority in the fire service equal experience or expertise?

Yes
No
Unsure

7. In regards to the seniority based promotional system of the Baton Rouge Fire Department, what is your satisfaction with the current promotional system?

Very satisfied
Satisfied
Unsatisfied
Very Unsatisfied

8. In your opinion does the current promotional system of the Baton Rouge Fire Department ensure a qualified candidate is promoted?

Always
Sometimes
Rarely
Never

9. In your opinion does the Baton Rouge fire department prepare its employees for promotions?

Yes
No
Unsure

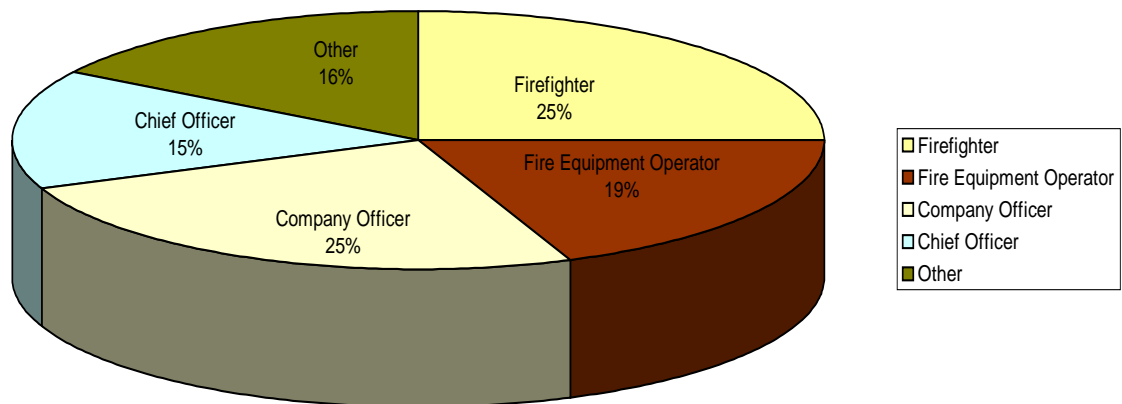
- 10 In your opinion do you see the current promotional system as an advantage or disadvantage to the public we serve?

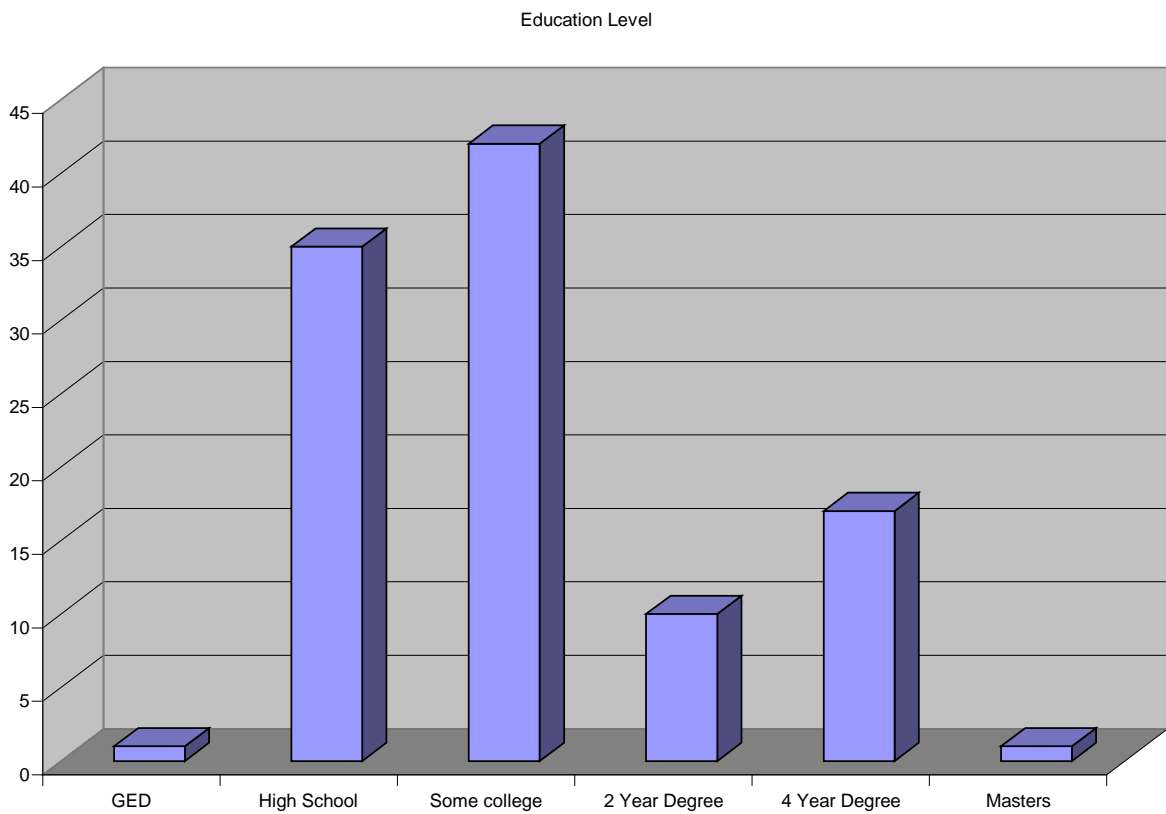
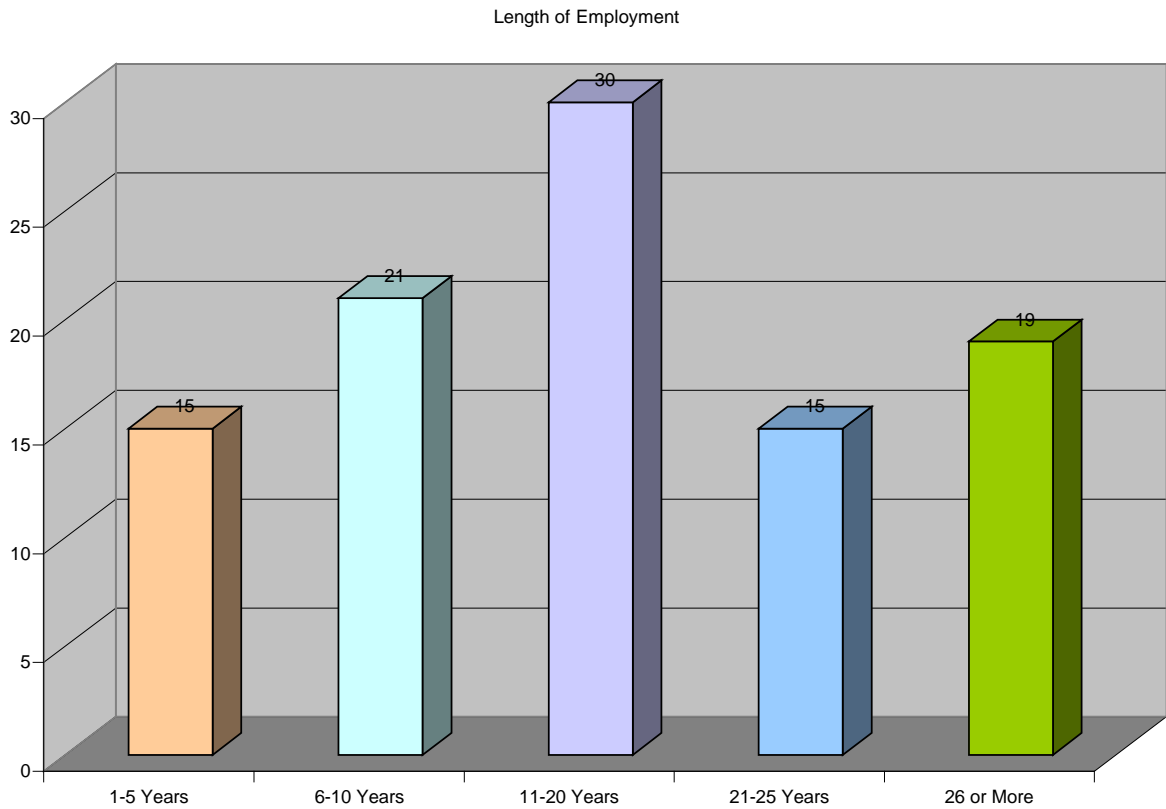
Advantage
Disadvantage
Unsure

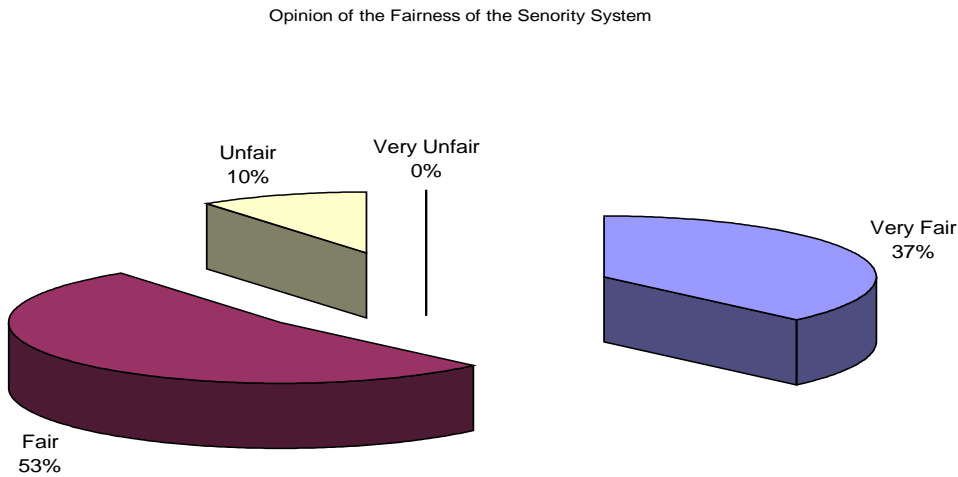
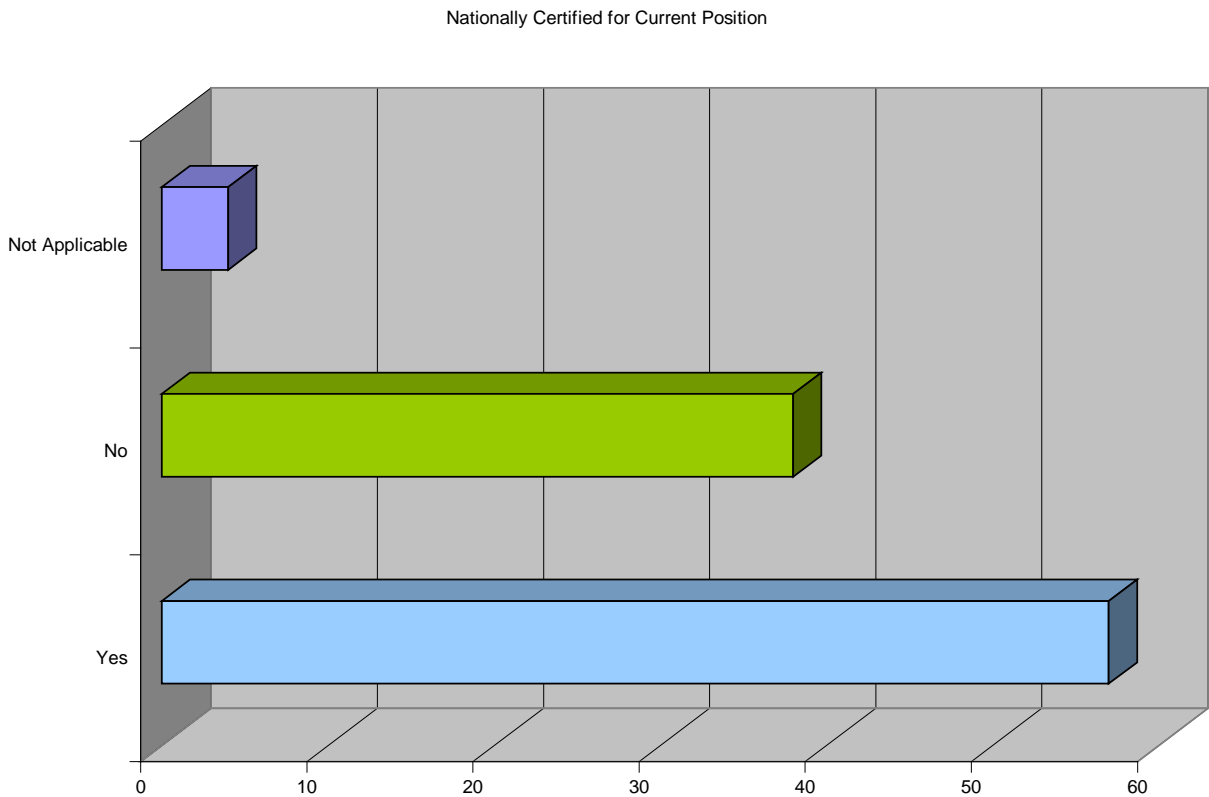
Appendix B

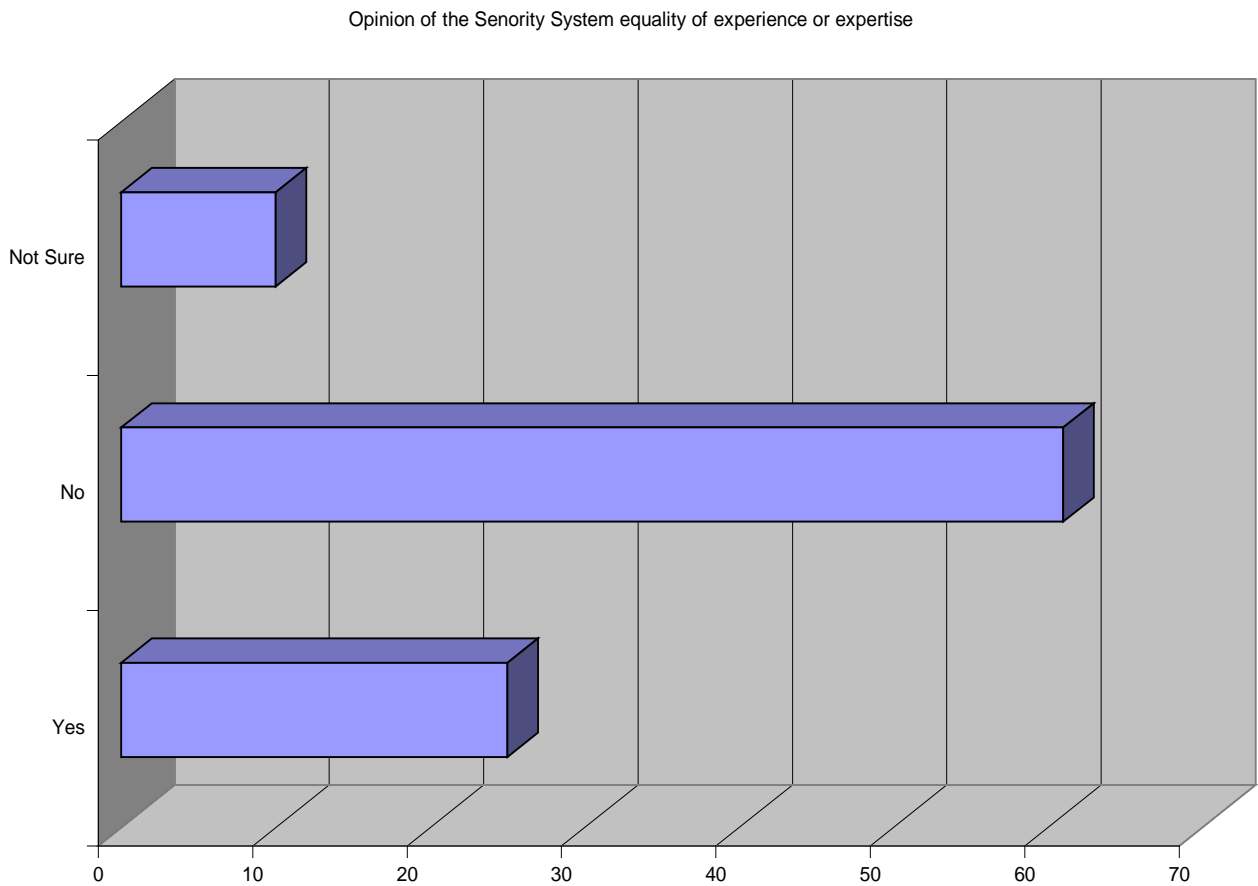
Results of Questionnaire

Current Position

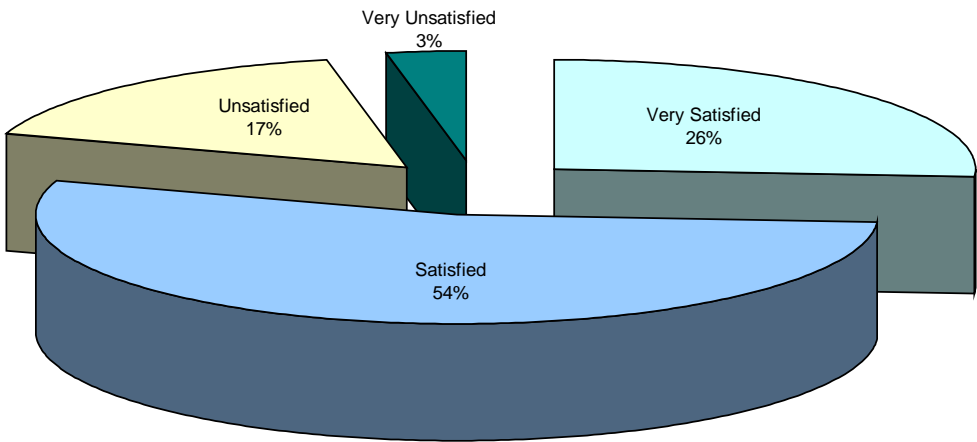




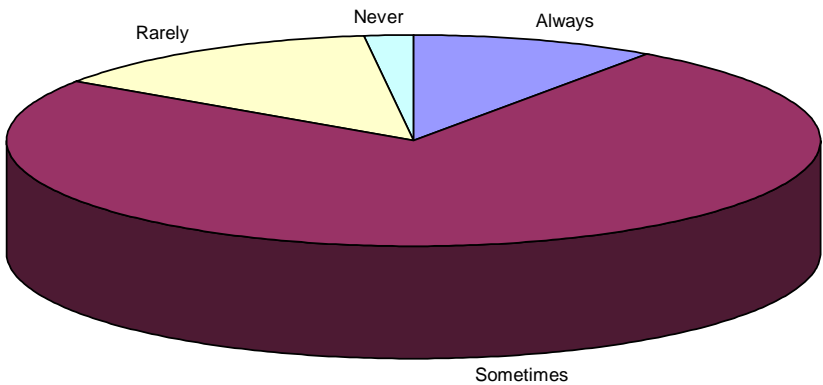




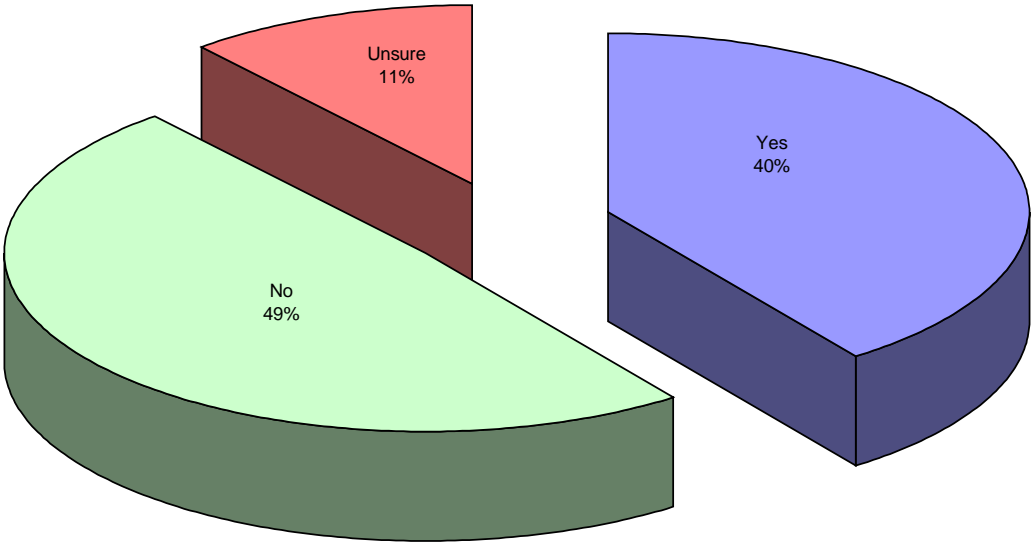
Satisfaction with the Current Promotional System



Opinion of Current System ensuring a qualified candidate is promoted



Opinion of Employees prepared for promotions



Opinion that current promotional system is an advantage or disadvantage to the public

